**The Puritans of New England**

**General Background**

The forces that led to the settlement of New England both at Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay stemmed from the religious controversy begun by Martin Luther’s Reformation movement. When Luther attacked the church for the failings he perceived, he opened the door for even more radical theologians such as John Calvin. They preached predestination and the need to rid the Protestant church—or churches of remaining elements of Roman Catholicism, the so-called “remnants of Popery.”

Those in England who felt the strongest need to “purify” the Anglican Church were called Puritans, and they divided themselves into two groups, one of which felt it was possible to live under the rules of the Church of England (they believed they could continue to push for reform from within the system), and the other of which felt they could not. These people were called “Separatists.” They were the famous Pilgrims who came over on the *Mayflower* in 1620.

The other group of Puritans discovered that although they could get along under the Elizabeth I, they did not do so well under James I, who threatened to “hound them out of the realm.” During the reign of King Charles I they decided that the only way to find the religious environment they were seeking was to go to America. Thus the Massachusetts Bay Company was founded, and the great Puritan migration began. The governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, laid out the plans for the colonists during the journey to America in his “Model of Christian Charity.”

The New England experience was similar in some ways to that of Virginia, but with a much stronger emphasis on religious practice. Virginia’s Anglicans were also very religious, and the Anglican Church was “established” in Virginia, but it was not as intense as Puritan New England in matters of religion. While the desire for material improvement (wealth), was part of the cultures of both Virginia and Massachusetts, but it is safe to say that religious motives were more controlling in New England.

**The Roots of Governance**

Virginia and Massachusetts came to be based on systems of governance that had roots in British philosophy. Thomas Hobbes wrote in “Leviathan” that man first existed in a state of nature. Man in nature, however, lived “in continued fear and danger of violent death,” and found that life was “solitary, nasty, brutish, and short.” Man’s natural freedom therefore needed to be curbed so that civilization could develop, and because human nature was inherently sinful, man needed to be controlled by a strong authority. In other words, in order to live together in harmony, men (and women) are required to give up a portion of their natural freedom so that society can function.

Later, philosopher John Locke wrote that in finding ways for controlling man, good institutions were needed, for man was a blank slate (“tabula rasa”) at birth and his nature would develop according to the kinds of mechanisms that were used to control his baser instincts. Thus both Locke and Hobbes provided the fundamental concepts that shaped English and, later, American political philosophy, though Locke’s ideas tended to support more republican forms whereas Hobbes leaned more toward the absolutism that is sometimes called “the divine right” of kings.

***The Mayflower Compact*: A Social Contract**

The basic idea that grows out of the philosophy of Hobbes and Locke and that was later elaborated upon by Jean Jacques Rousseau was the social contract. This theory of the social contract—that man is born free, but willingly gives up some freedom in exchange for the benefits of civilization—is at the heart of most Western political thought. The social contract theory is embedded in our Constitution, which is designed “to promote the general welfare.”

Another example is the Mayflower Compact. Looking at that document one is struck by its simplicity, yet it contains everything that is essential in the United States Constitution—all that is missing are the details.

**Massachusetts Bay: A Puritan Commonwealth**

How did the Puritans construct a society from scratch, based on religious belief? It was not easy, but the New Englanders did it. People have images of Puritans as somber people who were, in the words of a famous American journalist, “desperately afraid that somebody, somewhere might be having a good time.” That image is inaccurate.

Puritans were in fact very passionate people who lived their lives as fully as they could. They often wore colorful clothes, danced, and even drank “strong waters” on occasion. They had large families. What Puritans opposed was anything that wasted time or resources. For example, they thought gambling and card playing were sinful, not because they were inherently evil but because they wasted time.

Puritans worked very hard and saw themselves as stewards of God’s bounty—the Protestant work ethic originated with the Puritans and is the source of folk wisdom such as “Early to bed, early to rise . . . ,” “A penny saved is a penny earned,’ and so on. The Puritans believed that if one worked hard and pleased God, one would be successful in this life, so prosperity was seen as a good thing—a measure of God’s favor. Their church became the Congregational Church, a religious system that emphasized local control and independence. Religion was closely connected with the Puritan political structure, so the congregational system spilled over into their civic institutions, which gave us the famous “New England town meeting”.

The Puritans believed beyond much doubt that they were absolutely on the right track. John Winthrop’s “Model” describes a society that, if the Puritans had been able to achieve it, would have been a paradise on Earth. Being human, they could not live up to the idealized conditions Winthrop laid out, but they created a strong, vibrant society that prospered and influenced American behavior and attitudes far beyond their temporal and geographical boundaries.

Highlights of the Puritan era:

* For some time only those who were theologically acceptable could enter Massachusetts. The Puritans felt that rigid system was necessary for their survival: “We believe in liberty,” they claimed, “and others are at liberty to stay away from us!”
* By 1660 Massachusetts Puritans were concerned over the restoration of King Charles II to the throne. Stronger mercantile laws changed economic conditions in all the colonies, and in that decade the Puritans also adopted the “halfway covenant”—a sort of agreement that one was acceptable if one was at least trying to live the right kind of life—and numbers continued to grow.

**The “New England Way.”**

The Puritan way of life consisted of a mixture of religion and politics based on principles called the New England Way.

First, they believed in both personal and collective independence within each village or settlement. Their faith was known as Congregationalism. That gave them local control over both religious and political matters. The well-known New England town meeting was testimony to their idea of self-government. They recognized no higher authority than the Bible. Along with their congregational approach to community, they believed in individualism to the extent that everyone should be able to interpret the Bible for himself or herself. That reliance on the Bible had an obvious effect on education and literacy for the obvious reason that in order to interpret the Bible, one had to be able to read it. Teaching Puritan children to read was the mother's job, which in turn gave women a strong voice in family matters.

Second, while the principles above might suggest that Puritans enjoyed religious freedom, that freedom existed only within very strict limits. Their community had the right to exercise control over individuals in order to promote the common interest. Thus rigid enforcement of rules and laws was necessary whenever the community was thought to be threatened from within or without.

**The Puritans of New England**

1. How did Luther and Calvin contribute to the colonization of New England?  
2. What was the difference between the separatists and the puritans?  
3. What was the difference between the Anglican church in Virginia and the Anglican church in New England?  
4. How do the teachings of Thomas Hobbes reflect the manner in which New England developed?  
5. Where in New England do we see examples of Jean Jacques Rousseau's teachings?  
6. List some of the misconceptions about the Puritans (and correct them.)  
7. What was John Winthrop's goal for the colony?  
8. What caused the Puritans to "relax" their obsessions about religion?  
9. How was independence demonstrated in New England culture   
10. How was conformity demonstrated in New England culture?